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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 004186

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN POLICY POST ASAD SPEECH: NO FUNDAMENTAL
CHANGE IN COURSE EVIDENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

11. (C) Summary: Despite Syrian President Asad's confrontational rhetoric in his August 15 speech, there is unlikely to be any fundamental change in the overall orientation of Syrian policies, either foreign or domestic, although periodic damage control will be evident as a tactical adjustment, as it has been in the wake of Asad's speech. Regarding Lebanon, the policy (and the rhetoric) was -- and will continue to be -- confrontational, as Syria seeks to maintain controlled instability and pressure on the Siniora government and the March 14 group. The SARG will also act and speak aggressively on any moves to deploy UNIFIL forces -- or any augmented Lebanese force -- on its border with Lebanon. Such a posture is not new, nor is the burgeoning alliance with Iran, the friction with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and the heightened internal repression. Likewise Syria's longstanding interest in negotiations on the return of the Golan may see more activity, especially if recent Israeli expressions of interest continue. Visits by the Amir of Qatar and the Turkish FM -- and FM Mu'allim's visit to Helsinki may allow the SARG to argue that it is slowly breaking out of its diplomatic isolation. The SARG seems to be using its confrontational rhetoric, including formulations pointing to the war option if the peace option is rejected, to enhance current policy tendencies rather than to make any fundamental change in course. End Summary.

12. (C) BITTER RHETORIC IN THE SPEECH: The bold rhetorical flourishes in Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's August 15 speech provided some indications that Syrian policy was possibly becoming more hard-line and confrontational, especially in the wake of what is overwhelmingly perceived in the Arab world as Hizballah "victory" over Israel. The speech obviously was meant to remind Syrians and the wider Arab world that Syrian support for Hizballah had contributed mightily to that victory. Asad's lashing out at those Arabs who failed to support the resistance in Lebanon was his clumsy way of expressing resentment that Syria had stood nearly alone in its support for Hizballah, especially in the uncertain first days of the hostilities. The speech also seemed to express some frustration and bitterness about the isolation that Syria has endured over the past two years, facilitated significantly by Arab regimes, for SARG support for "resistance" elements such as Hamas and Hizballah, and even for the way Arab leaders have condescended to Asad as the recalcitrant, inexperienced leader who refused to give up on the "futile" notion of resistance. It is clear from the tone of the speech and from subsequent discussions with contacts that hard-liners in inner circle of advisors

exercised a heavy hand in shaping the speech.

13. (C) BUT LITTLE SIGN OF BOLD POLICY DEPARTURE: Despite the hard-line speech, the preponderance of evidence indicates that Syria is not embarking on a bold new confrontational policy or closing itself off in another layer of self-imposed isolation. The SARG's aggressive damage control after the speech, both behind the scenes and publicly, including Bashar's August 23 interview on Dubai TV, clearly indicates that the regime feels the speech went too far. Replaying a dynamic that is a constant of Syrian regime politics, moderates led by FM Mu'allim and Minister of Information Bilal have been empowered, at least temporarily, to correct what is viewed as the tactical excesses of the hard-liners.

14. (C) The overall lines of Syrian policy are not likely change, however. Regarding Lebanon, the SARG will continue to speak aggressively and "stir things up" with the help of its allies there. The aggressive language was evident August 23 even in the midst of Asad's charm offensive on Dubai TV. While politely backpedaling and denying any intention to insult Arab leaders, Asad noted that any attempt to deploy UNIFIL forces on the border between Syria and Lebanon would "signal a hostile act against Syria and will create problems" between the two countries. FM Mu'allim spelled out the threat more explicitly during his visit to Helsinki when he told the Finns, according to public statements attributed to the Finnish FM, that Syria would close the border with Lebanon if these UNIFIL forces were deployed on the border. Pro-Syria press assets in Lebanon are also viciously attacking the Lebanese government in response to reports that the LAF is being deployed along the border. (Comment: The regime knows from its brief closure of the border in 2005 -- and similar moves in the past -- that this is a potent weapon

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that can inflict tremendous economic damage on Lebanon.)

15. (C) HARSH VIEW ON LEBANON A CONSTANT: In tandem with the strident rhetoric, analysts here such as al-Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi and a-Safir correspondent Ziad Haidar, who follow SARG policy closely and are in regular contact senior members of the regime, tell us that it is clear Syria will continue to meddle in Lebanese affairs, hoping to bring about the collapse of the Siniora government. They and other contacts hint that the meddling will go further and will continue to provoke instability in Lebanon, while avoiding all-out chaos. According to Hamidi, it is "clearly in Syria,s interest, and Iran,s" to continue with such a role, since there are "no incentives" being offered to it for not doing so.

16. (C) GOLAN &PEACE8 OPTION MAY SEE MOVEMENT: Syria,s longstanding willingness to enter into negotiations with Israel on a return of the Golan (without making any concessions on terrorist groups) remains very much alive. The Turkish DCM told the Charge that this was one of the messages in Bashar,s (and FM Mu'allim,s) presentation to visiting Turkish FM Gul August 22, going as far as to suggest that Mu'allim had been authorized to carry a &new initiative8 on the Golan to Helsinki to present to the EU President. The Turk said that Bashar was very keen to hear from Gul Gul,s impressions of Olmert,s real views on the prospect of peace negotiations from Gul,s visit to Israel. The French have also received signals that the Syrians have an interest in pressing their agenda on the Golan directly with Israel. Any possibility for progress on Golan negotiations will reinforce the view here that the current policy is working.

17. (C) REAL POLICY SHIFT NEARLY YEAR OLD: Syria,s current policy, despite its tactical zigs and zags, began to take shape in the early fall of 2005, under intense international pressure in the run-up to the issuance of the first report of then-UNIIIC head Detlev Mehlis. Asad,s University of Damascus speech last November provided the public outlines and rationales for this more confrontational posture they

have not changed that much since then. Even then, Asad highlighted the option of "resistance," noting that "the region has two choices, either resistance or chaos." Both explicitly and with his references to Syrian dignity, national identity, and refusal to submit, Asad made clear that Syria would pursue a policy of resistance and modulated confrontation. Since Hizballah's "victory," these references to resistance and confrontation have become a bit more insistent, and have been yoked more explicitly to getting back the Golan Heights. Nonetheless, Asad is usually very careful, as he was in the Dubai TV interview, to qualify support for the notion of resistance, calling it not a government prerogative but a people's option (a meaningless notion in a police state like Syria).

18. (C) IRAN ALLIANCE, INTERNAL REPRESSION TO CONTINUE: On other fronts, SARG policy remains relatively constant. The alliance with Iran will continue and Syrian leaders are likely to continue to use it -- especially in the wake of Hizballah's growing power in Lebanon -- to prod regional powers like Egypt and Saudi Arabia into sullen acquiescence to , if not real support for, SARG policies. Internally, repression of the opposition will continue, as his language in the Dubai interview made clear, although no major high-signature crackdowns will be necessary. The arrests and harassment over the past year, in tandem with the war climate that developed during the fighting in Lebanon, have completely silenced and paralyzed the internal opposition, and much of the external opposition, who are fearful of being branded by the SARG as "agents of the Israelis and the Americans. "

19. (C) IS THERE SOMETHING MORE? There remain some observers who insist that SARG policy has gone further, and with its complete embrace of Hizballah and Iran, and may even be approaching a point of no return as its policy hardens into one of rigid confrontation. We do not see much persuasive evidence for that view. Instead, we observe the messy blend of confrontational posturing and hasty backtracking that combines to endow Syrian policies with generally cold calculations that can be alternately predatory and hostile, as when facing Lebanon, or pay lip service to accommodation, as on Iraq, while waiting to see what types of incentives might be forthcoming that could persuade the regime to change

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its policies in ways that might facilitate U.S. interests.

110. (C) SARG WILL USE VISITS TO CLAIM ISOLATION IS ENDING: The Mu'allim visit to Helsinki, the Turkish FM's and Qatari Amir,s' visits here (although the latter may have had more to do with the Qataris seeing an opportunity to take advantage of Syrian-Saudi tensions to poke a stick in the eye of the Saudis), and the upcoming visit scheduled by the UN SYG also will be used by the regime to claim that it,s diplomatic isolation may be drawing to a close, even if we oppose it. While the cancellation of the German FM's visit immediately in the wake of the speech caused some consternation, there seems to be confidence that developments in Lebanon are so congruent with Syrian interests that eventually Syrian views and desires will have to be solicited in a way the SARG can use to break its isolation more fundamentally. Renewed Israeli interest in negotiations would reinforce any such trend. Given these factors, the SARG is likely to continue to opt for its current policy course, straight ahead, with some tacking but no fundamental shift in direction.

CORBIN